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Sustainability in Danish Public Libraries

How do the Sustainable Development Goals Inspire their Work?

Abstract: The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals¹ play a growing significance in the work of public libraries in Denmark. This article highlights national and local projects, points out learnings and discusses a framework for getting started working with the SDGs, including what skills library professionals need to achieve these goals.

Keywords: Sustainability, sustainable development goals, public libraries, Denmark

Nachhaltigkeit in Dänischen Öffentlichen Bibliotheken

Wie beeinflussen die Ziele für nachhaltige Entwicklung ihre Arbeit?

Zusammenfassung: Die Nachhaltigkeitsziele der Vereinten Nationen spielen eine immer wichtigere Rolle bei der Arbeit Öffentlicher Bibliotheken in Dänemark. Dieser Artikel beleuchtet nationale und lokale Projekte, zeigt Erfahrungen auf und erörtert die Rahmenbedingungen für den Einstieg in die Arbeit mit den SDGs, einschließlich der Fähigkeiten, die Bibliothekare benötigen, um diese Ziele zu erreichen.

Schlüsselwörter: Nachhaltigkeit, Sustainable Development Goals, Öffentliche Bibliotheken, Dänemark

1 Introduction

This article focuses on national and local political developments addressing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)². Insights from national and local projects, large and small, are presented, and required skillsets to work with the SDGs in a library setting are discussed.

Over the last years, the SDGs have become more visible in the public debate in Denmark. They have also played a growing significance in the agenda of the national and local governments, and how private companies communicate about themselves. It has become increasingly crucial to be aware of, work with and work towards the Agenda 2030 goals. The Danish government has developed an action plan in 2017

¹ United Nations (2015).

² United Nations (n.d.).

that describes the work ahead, centred around the global goals.³ The updated action plan was published just before deadline of this article. Libraries are given an important role in the new plan:

“The Government will strengthen the libraries’ work with and dissemination of the World Goals to make the libraries a facilitator for the popular anchoring of the UN World Goals. The initiative involves i.a. events on the World Goals in libraries, a World Goals certification program for libraries and skills development for librarians regarding the dissemination of the World Goals”⁴ (Authors translation)

KL (Local Government Denmark)⁵, the association of the 98 Danish municipalities, has also developed an action plan⁶ that encourages the municipalities to work with the SDGs. Municipalities are not obliged to do this unless it is part of national legislation. However, it would be cause very bad publicity if a municipality or library was neither aware of, nor worked actively with the SDGs. It would be a sign that libraries are not aware of the changes in the world around them.[^]

The municipalities in Denmark fund the public libraries. Besides being the natural location for the population to find information about the SDGs, libraries know that they are apparent partners and information centres about the SDGs and related issues. There are both local initiatives at libraries and projects at national level – and a lot more to come.



Fig. 1: SDG Poster © United Nations

³ Handlingsplan for FN's verdensmål – Danmarks opfølgning på FN's verdensmål for bæredygtig udvikling (2017).

⁴ Handlingsplan for FN's Verdensmål (2021).

⁵ <https://www.kl.dk/english>.

⁶ Kommunernes fælles indsats for Verdensmålene Kommunernes fælles indsats for verdensmålene (2018).

Many of the projects have been on hold since last year because of the global pandemic. Some projects are planned, but have not yet been launched. Nevertheless, the SDGs have a continuously more important place in what libraries are doing, especially if measured by what is going on currently at national level, in early 2021.

In the following, I will describe two local projects and two national projects with the aim and potential to inspire libraries to start with their own SDG work. I will also touch on new perspectives of what libraries can do – not only in a Danish context – to work with the SDGs. I will also point out what skills librarians and information professionals need to work towards the global development goals of the Agenda 2030.

2 National Sustainability Projects in Denmark

DB2030⁷ is a network for organisations working with the SDGs who want to connect their work to the population via public libraries. It is hosted within the Danish Library Association⁸ and has public libraries as members. Other members are the Danish Union of Cultural and Information Academics⁹, different think tanks, universities, and private partners.

DB2030 hosts conferences and other learning and network opportunities. The network has recently developed a three-course learning program for librarians.¹⁰ This program is hosted by the Danish Union of Cultural and Information Academics. It will cover the following topics:

1. Target groups, partnerships, and communities of action
2. Equality and inequality
3. Consumption and biodiversity

The courses will be held from mid-May to mid-June 2021 and aim to give librarians concrete skills to use in their work with the SDGs in their local setting. The intention is to expand the program to cover more themes during the months to follow. The modules are held online and consist of a series of short presentations. Following these, participants are invited to take part in voluntary networking and knowledge sharing in breakout rooms.

⁷ <https://db2030.dk/>.

⁸ <https://www.db.dk/english>.

⁹ <https://kulturoginformation.dk/.../the-danish-union-of-cultural-and-information-academics>.

¹⁰ <https://kulturoginformation.dk/fag-og-politik/nyheder/2021/faa-et-kompetenceloeft-og-skab-folkelig-forankring-af-verdensmaalene-paa-dit-bibliotek>.

DB2030 also works actively on a Sustainable Development Goals declaration positioning the library as a knowledge institution and entry point to all world goals. The library as location for information, knowledge and facts will form one aspect. The library as a proactive player, who can contribute to concrete actions and changes through initiatives, facilitation and citizen involvement, will be the other aspect. Furthermore, DB2030 has contacted the Danish government and the European Commission, urging them to regard libraries as active partners in anchoring the SDGs in the everyday life of Danish and European citizens.

Last but not least, DB2030 is working in a partnership with the Danish organisation CHORA to establish an SDG certification for library buildings, based upon an already existing certification for Danish elementary schools.

3 SDGs, Elderly Citizens and Libraries

Another national level project in the making is the Danish Think Tank's "Libraries of the Future" project called "SDGs, Elderly Citizens and Libraries"¹¹. It will run over two years and receive over 700,000 Euro funding from the Velux Foundations¹².

In collaboration with libraries in seven municipalities across Denmark (with plans to extend to thirty municipalities), the project intends to engage senior citizens in local communities around the SDGs. Furthermore the scope is to strengthen the well-being of the senior citizens by enabling them to contribute to making a meaningful difference, in cooperation with others.

The project is rooted in a solid interdisciplinary partnership between project partners from libraries, municipalities, senior citizens' organisations, researchers and Organisations working with the sustainable development goals. According to the plan, it will start during the first part of 2021.

Ravinder Kauer-Pedersen, the library manager of Ballerup Public Library, one of the participating libraries, says:

"The project is a unique opportunity to build a bridge between generations. We see that many are ready to act towards a better and more sustainable world. Here we have the opportunity to turn a practice into a framework the library can use to support local actors and help ensure public support. If we succeed, the goal is to change citizens from a passive role, concerning a

¹¹ <https://www.fremtidensbiblioteker.dk/uploads/website/pdfer1/Kortprojektbeskrivelse.pdf>.

¹² <https://veluxfoundations.dk/en>.

complex and perhaps overwhelming global agenda, to active participation, in local action-oriented communities."¹³ (Authors translation)

4 Local Examples

Many libraries are working with the SDGs, so the examples in this article could easily have been a lot of other Danish libraries. Unfortunately, the information on many library web pages is a bit out of date – even if we consider the lockdown during the corona pandemic. I have chosen the examples of Ballerup Public Library and Aarhus Public Library because they have a long experience with this work and also because they both have the SDGs as part of their library strategy.

4.1 Ballerup Public Library

Ballerup¹⁴ has been working with the SDGs from several perspectives since 2019. Besides being one of the participating libraries in the DB2030, as mentioned earlier, they host a yearly festival called "The World's Best Solutions LIVE"¹⁵ that presents to the public different angles relating to sustainability and the SDGs. After the festival in 2019, they invited other Danish libraries to an event to share their learnings. The library also has a key focus on professional development for staff centered around sustainability and the SDGs.

Ballerup Library is one of the partners in Gro Selv¹⁶, a national project ("Grow yourself") from the Danish Green Think Tank CONCITO¹⁷. Gro Selv is an open community of young people who experiment with making sustainability more tangible and practical in smaller and larger projects. Examples are a yearly festival, workshops, events and fellowship around recycling, upcycling, growing and preparing sustainable food, and developing ways to take care of the planet. They also have events for the community centered around the SDGs and have hosted a children's SDG festival.

Ballerup is part of UPSCALE¹⁸, a Nordic project about how public libraries can be used as hubs for an upscaling of collaborative consumption, contributing to transforming into a low-emission society. Other

¹³ <https://www.fremtidensbiblioteker.dk/verdensml-og-ldre>.

¹⁴ <https://bib.ballerup.dk/>.

¹⁵ <https://bib.ballerup.dk/nyheder/events-udstillinger/worlds-best-solutions-live>.

¹⁶ <https://www.groselv.dk/>.

¹⁷ <https://concito.dk>.

¹⁸ <https://cicero.oslo.no/en/posts/projects/upscale-oppskalering-av-baerekraftig-deling-ved-hjelp-av-offentlige-biblioteker>.

international partners include Public Library Innovation Exchange¹⁹ (PLIX) with the theme of libraries and sustainability.

Thomas Sture Rasmussen, Development Consultant at Ballerup Public Library, says that the SDG framework serves as a shared language that makes it easier to establish new partnerships. This goes for the political level, the private and the educational sector.

4.2 Aarhus Public Library

In Aarhus²⁰, librarians started a project that shares some of Gro Selv's characteristics. In the beginning, it was a project for young people to grow vegetables in a community garden at the branch library in Risskov. The intention was to create fellowships in the community, centered around sustainability. The initiative has now developed into a project open for people of all ages.

One of the learnings from the project is that goals in sustainability often complement each other. By not only growing the herbs and vegetables, but also eating food together, those involved help reduce food waste. The library becomes a space for the community to work together, to learn by getting their hands dirty, and to have an impact at the same time.

In "Verdensrummet", a project centered around SDG number 17 (partnerships), elementary school classes work together with local firms, other learning institutions and the library around the SDGs. This project will also be expanded to be relevant to a broader part of the public. With a future location at DOKK1 in Aarhus, it will be a showcase for the public where they will be able to learn more about the SDGs.

The money the library earns from selling used books goes into a special fund. Locals can apply for funds for sustainability projects that make a positive difference in Aarhus.

Some of the many events that Aarhus hosts at their libraries are also centered around the SDGs. An example is that Aarhus hosts repair cafes where people get help repairing and thereby reusing things. "Aarhus wants to make the SDGs tangible and understandable and support people's possibilities to make change together," says Helene Bruhn Schwartzman, who is leading the sustainability work at Aarhus Public Libraries.²¹

¹⁹ <https://plix.media.mit.edu/>.

²⁰ <https://www.aakb.dk/>.

²¹ Personal email to the author.



Fig. 2: Repair Café at Aarhus Public Library. Photo credit: DOKK1

5 Key Drivers for SDG Projects

Regarding the projects mentioned above, both Aarhus and Ballerup point out that the experiences of working in partnerships and connecting to the public in new ways present critical learnings for the library. Both libraries are driven by an eagerness to connect people and support them in making changes that will have a positive impact on the SDGs.

Another significant and important aspect I would like to point out is that both libraries have in common that the SDGs are mentioned explicitly in their library strategies.²² Both also refer to being a part of the municipalities' strategy for rolling out the SDGs to the public. As pointed out earlier, this is not unique to the libraries mentioned in this article. Many other libraries also mention the SDGs in their strategies, examples being Roskilde, Hillerød and Helsingør. Many libraries are working with the SDGs, without them being part of their library strategy. That could result in the library working with a few events or a small project, but not, in the long run, focusing on the SDGs. Making the SDGs part of the strategy will make them part of the organisation's DNA. That will result in the library working towards these goals for the foreseeable future.

²² https://bib.ballerup.dk/sites/ballerup.ddbcms.dk/files/files/page/strategi_2020-2023_k01.pdf.

6 Reflections on how to do SDG Projects in Public Libraries

6.1 No Greenwashing

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Greenwashing means "behaviour or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is."²³ Greenwashing is often mentioned in the Danish public debate as both a issue to be aware of and, by all means, to avoid. It is not enough to try to fit what the library is already doing into the SDG framework and brag about it by putting the logo for that specific goal up in front of you. Common sense is that you should make fundamental changes and then brag about them when you see they are working.

6.2 How to Get Started with SDGs in Your Library

When a new field becomes part of the core of what you do, you always need to consider if you have the right skillset. As SDGs become part of what libraries need to do towards 2030 – and probably for many years to come after 2030 – we need to consider what skills are required and how to get them.

As we can see from the examples above, especially the SDG learning project from DB 2030, there is already a focus on required skillsets in Denmark. It is essential to have these skills to make a project a success, and good questions we need to ask ourselves as both staff and leaders going forward could be:

Do I have the required basic knowledge about the 17 SDGs and their sub-goals to work with them as part of our core mission for the years to come?

- Who shall we partner up with, and what new skills do we need in order to work professionally with the SDGs?
- Can I combine knowledge from the different goals so we can make an impact on more than a few goals?
- How do we, as a library, reach people in our community who are not already interested in the SDGs? In what way can we reach them?
- How do we inspire the community to work with us as partners on projects within the SDG framework?
- How can we make sure that we think outside the box regarding the SDGs and not just support the most prominent projects?

These questions are also the ones that are behind the research phase of the upcoming 23 Things project²⁴ about the SDGs, building on the award-winning format of 23 Things and 23 Mobile Things.

²³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/greenwash>.

²⁴ <https://23sdgthings.net/>.

7 Where do we go Next?

As part of all the Danish projects, it is common to focus on partnerships with other organisations or parts of the local community. The SDGs are global goals with the scope to make our entire planet better and in better shape. To make this happen, we need to work together on a global, regional and local level. There is room for more cross-regional and cross-national projects that will connect local communities to the more extensive global community. We need to understand the challenges in other communities to see how we as partners can actively support the global goals on a global level.

Sharing knowledge and re-using ideas from others in cross-national projects and making (video) conferences to discuss issues and solutions are exciting options for the future. Similarly, library professionals all round the world need many of the same skills to make an impact in their communities and beyond.

Learning projects on a global level about the content of the SDGs, how we can work with them and reach the public, how to make meaningful partnerships, and how to share the stories for best practice are one of the things we urgently need. The libraries that are leaders in this field must share as much as they can to help libraries that have just started the journey. This could represent genuine partnerships across borders, leading to the changes we need and enabling the development more sustainable communities throughout the world.

While Danish libraries are aware of and working seriously with the SDGs, the ambition is to expand further. A way to do this, could be that more libraries make the SDG work part of their strategies.

8 Conclusion

The article calls for international partnerships, not only on IFLA level but also cross-border partnerships between local public libraries. This must include expertise from people who know about the SDGs and about working with strategic development. The aim should be to share knowledge, ideas and best practice, and develop new ideas on how to actively support public learning about the SDGs and the possibilities for empowering people to act towards the goals that will make the planet better for all human beings.

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